Joseph Kraft Post 12/28/72

Desperate Signals or Sour Grapes at the FBI?

AN EXTRAORDINARY thing has been going on inside the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Middle-level agents have been frantically trying to signal to the outside world that their boss, Acting Director L. Patrick Gray III, is a rotten apple.

But the desperate signals find only the most limited response. For Mr. Gray's faults do not correspond with the public stereotype of the weakness appropriate to the director of the FBI.

The stereotype is of course based on the example of the only previous director of the FBI, the late J. Edgar Hoover. Mr. Hoover was the living image of the tough, law and order cop. He was never highly sensitive to the rights of unpopular groups, whether criminals or political dissidents. Over the years, he lost touch with the newer developments in law enforcement as applied in the larger metropolitan police departments. At the end, he became a kind of bureaucratic dictator, keeping down good men, and growling at outside criticism.

Mr. Gray, who was appointed as acting director by President Nixon when Mr. Hoover died eight months ago, has obviously been at pains not to repeat his predecessor's mistakes. Indeed, his stewardship has been a lesson in avoiding the Hoover image.

Where Mr. Hoover surrounded himself with former agents of a certain age, Mr. Gray has set up a personal staff headed by three young lawyers from the Justice Department. He has begun taking women as agents. He has established an equal opportunity office in the Bureau with one white agent and one black agent in charge.

He has begun to court the press—even the liberal press. Indeed, it appears that a recent story asserting that Mr. Gray would be promoted from acting director to director in his own right was leaked by Mr. Gray himself.

He has even begun to consult known critics of the Bureau. A couple of months after taking office, he received a delegation from the Committee for Public Justice, a civil liberties group which organized a well-publicized and not exactly friendly conference on the FBI in Princeton last year.

But there is more to being director of the FBI than avoiding the faults of J. Edgar Hoover. There is also the matter of Mr. Hoover's strong suits—his professionalism and independence from political pressures.

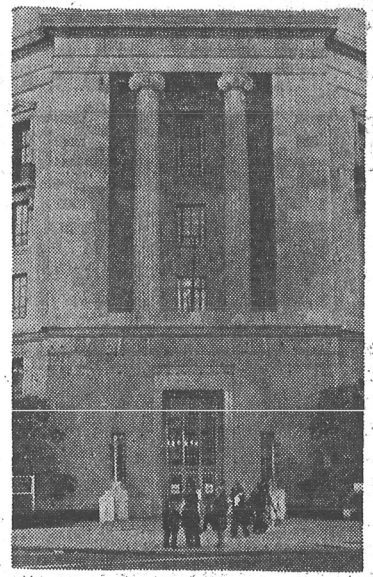
It is at this point that the complaints of the middle-level Bureau people become relevant. These complaints, which were set forth in a memorandum prepared inside the Bureau and leaked to the press, fit under two connected heads.

First there is a charge that Mr. Gray is unprofessional. The memo cites a lack of experience in police work or management. It makes a big deal of the fact that Mr. Gray transferred special agents in charge of FBI offices in Washington, Honolulu and Los Angeles, and leaked the reasons for the transfer to the press. It implies that the leaks are inconsistent with maintaining esprit de corps in the Bureau. It claims that presently morale in the Bureau is "at an all-time low point."

The second complaint has been developed from the memo by two journalists of repute in the field—Walter Pincus of the New Republic and Jeremiah O'Leary of the Washington Star. They have pointed out that Mr. Gray's background is largely political—that, in fact, he owes his career, since leaving the Navy in 1960, almost entirely to President Nixon.

They aver that he has been going around the country using his office and its authority to plug for the President. Mr. O'Leary even suggests that one of the transferred special agents was moved because he showed some vigor in investigating the Watergate scandal.

For my own part, I find it not easy to form a judgment. The memo smacks of sour grapes on the part of FBI old-timers who would never accept any substitute for Mr. Hoover. On the other hand, the charge of being susceptible to political influence is grave—



"They aver that Gray has been . . . using his office and its authority to plug for the President."

the gravest kind of charge that can be brought against an FBI Director.

For that reason, the issue whould not go by the boards just because Mr. Gray does not conform to the image dear to Mr. Hoover's critics. Certainly the matter is important enough for a close look by senators, notably John McClellan of Arkansas, who claim to care about law enforcement.

© 1972, Publishers-Hall Syndicate